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Heroin in SE Asia

CIAU-Laos

Statute Versus Treaty As Narcotics Control

On paper at least, September '18 looked like a great day for the good guys in their battle against international drug traffic.

There on Capitol Hill was the U. S. Senate ratifying by a vote of 69 to 0 a strengthening revision of a 90-nation treaty designed to clamp down on the narcotics trade.

Henceforth, the revision provides, the International Narcotics Control Board will see to it that the world production of dope is limited to the quantity needed for medical and scientific use. Production above that ceiling will be reported to the signatory nations and the United Nations General Assembly.

And there at the Department of State was President Nixon saying this country will suspend all American economic and military assistance to any government "whose leaders participate in or protect the activities of those who contribute to our drug problem."

Just which initiative will be the more productive is hard to say just now.

That of the Senate is dependent on devious channels and protocols, but it does have the advantage of being taken without benefit of George McGovern jaw-boning.

The route the president can take is a good deal more direct, if only he will follow it now that he has made a McGovern-nudged pitch for diligence.

But the chances for clamp-down would

be a great deal fatter, one suspects, if the president had been right when he said he is "required by statute" to cut off aid to governments contributing to our drug problem.

The statute is not quite so forceful.

The rule, written into last year's Foreign Assistance Act, is that aid shall be cut off only when the president himself decides that a government has "failed to take adequate steps" to suppress dangerous drugs. The president is the sole judge of which countries are being helpful and which are not. He is "required" to take no action that his personal verdict on the evidence does not support.

His evidence, clearly, is not the same as that which has disturbed Senator McGovern.

The president, says his challenger, has failed to "crack down on the narcotics trade in Laos, Thailand and South Vietnam" because the administration needs "air bases in Thailand, Laos" and "mercenaries and Vietnamese soldiers to fight its war."

There may be more partisan testimony than hard evidence in that accusation, of course. Even so, the McGovern statement is not barren of corroboration.

There have been charges that the CIA's Air America has helped transport heroin in Southeast Asia. In his book, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, Arthur W. McCoy raised the question of CIA agents knowingly engaging in such traffic to help maintain alliances. And Mr. McCoy qualified with no question his assertion that officials in Southeast Asian governments allied to the U. S. have profited from the drug traffic.

To accuse is not to prove. But if Mr. McCoy's questions and statements are rooted in nothing firmer than supposition, they suggest that the president, even if not derelict, will have a difficult time being diligent in application of that statute.

The helpfulness (or, for that matter, the helplessness) of allies like South Vietnam and Thailand in areas other than drug control cannot fail to influence Mr. Nixon's reading of the evidence.

Not, that is, so long as a keystone of this nation's foreign policy is to prop up such allies.

Presidential options running afoul of presidential commitments, it's just possible the Senate has taken the swifter route to narcotics control.